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ABSTRACT

Athol Fugard, a white South African playwright/actor/director of international renown, has worked toward the establishment of an integrated, multiracial theater not associated with the white South African establishment. In his plays, Fugard has made racism and the ravaging effects of racial tension come alive as he presents aspects of these problems on a personal level. Fugard studied anthropology and philosophy in college, hitchhiked through Africa, and worked on a tramp steamer before marrying an actress and beginning his first theater company in 1956. "Master Harold...and the Boys" was premiered at Yale Repertory Theater in 1982--it was banned for performance in South Africa as being too inflammatory. The play, containing autobiographical elements, explores the relationship between Hally, a white 17-year-old whose mother owns a teashop, and Sam and Willie, black men in their forties who work in the shop. As the play nears its climax, Hally demands that Sam call him "Master Harold," highlighting the fact that relationships between Whites and Blacks in South Africa are those between master and servant. "My Children! My Africa!" was produced in 1989 and deals with an older black teacher who hopes that violence can be avoided and change brought about by working within the system. Fugard's theater presents the universal themes of friendship, family, and the need for intimacy in a South African context. His plays offer examples of interracial relationships in which the individuals find common ground. (Contains 18 references.) (NKA)

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TOWARD INTERRACIAL UNDERSTANDING: RELATIONSHIPS IN ATHOL FUGARD'S "MASTER HAROLD" . . . and the boys and My Children! My Africa!

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Toward Interracial Understanding: Relationships in
Athol Fugard's "MASTER HAROLD" . . . and the boys
and My Children! My Africa!

According to Robert Cohen (1988), the Market Theatre Company of Johannesburg has earned a fine reputation, not only for the high quality of its productions, but also for its courageous confrontation with apartheid. Some productions of the Market Theatre Company have toured and been restaged the world over and have proved crucial in shaping world opinion on the issue of apartheid. Such a play is "MASTER HAROLD". . . and the boys (1982) by Athol Fugard, a white South African playwright of great international importance. Fugard, who is also and actor and a director, has worked toward the establishment of an integrated, multiracial theatre not associated with the white establishment.

In his work, Fugard has made racism and the ravaging effects of racial tension come alive as he presents aspects of these problems on a personal level. Thus, on one level, Fugard, who sees himself as a regional writer, reflects his South Africa. In a speech delivered in 1987, he calls himself a South African writer, but says his region, his home, is the Eastern Cape. Many of his images come from his life in this region. Yet he also considers himself a spokesman for humanity. Thus, he deals with universal problems. According to Mel Gussow (1982), the plays of Fugard not only make powerful political statements, proving the validity of art as a social instrument, but they are also universal, transcending time and place. According to Fugard, "Man is one experience, one pattern" (1982).

In this paper, two plays, "MASTER HAROLD". . . and the boys (1982), and My Children! My Africa! (1989) will serve as examples of Fugard's work. First, we will point out how Fugard's life and reflections of his South Africa have served as stimuli in the creation of these plays. Next, we will see how these works provide illustrations of how relationships between people of different races develop and how they are affected by the policies of apartheid. Lastly, we will see what implications these plays have for interracial understanding--particularly useful for the students in today's world.

Before we begin, a few biographical notes about Fugard will be helpful. Fugard was born in 1932 to an English-speaking South African father and an Afrikaans-speaking mother. He grew up in a family that was divided in its view of racial affairs. His father was full of racial prejudice, while his mother had a capacity for looking beyond the South African situation and seeing people as people. He credits his mother with "'having paced my emancipation from prejudice and bigotry'" (Klaus, 1991, p. 1011).

Fugard has an elder brother and a younger sister. His parents moved to Port Elizabeth in 1935, where his mother ran a boarding house, and later, the tea room in St. George's Park. in his introduction to Three Port Elizabeth Plays (1974), Fugard describes Port Elizabeth as being "very representative of South Africa in the range of its social strata, from total affluence on the white side to the extremist of poverty of the non-white." He adds that he cannot conceive of himself as being separate from Port Elizabeth.

Fugard received his education at Port Elizabeth Technical College and the University of Cape Town, studying philosophy and social anthropology, leaving the University before completing his degree. He hitchhiked up Africa and then spent two years on a tramp steamer in the Far East. According to Wells (1987), Fugard was the only white crew member of a crew composed of blacks and Asians. In Bombay, he was caught in a pub brawl. Two crew members, both Malays, stood by his side. Fugard says that after that, things were different, since the experience had purged him of racial prejudice.

Before returning to South Africa, he worked in theatre and television in Europe and America. On his return, he became actively involved in theatre when he met his wife-to-be, Sheila Meiring, who was working as an actress in Cape Town. In 1956 they formed the Serpent Company, and experimental drama group, which included both black and white actors at a time when racial mixing was illegal (Jacobus, 1992).

Also in 1956 Fugard and Meiring were married. They have one daughter, Lisa, born in 1961. In 1958 the Fugards moved to Johannesburg, where Fugard found a job as a clerk in a Native Commissioner's Court. According to Fugard (1974), "During my six months in that Court Room I saw more suffering than I could cope with. I began to understand how my country functioned." His first full-length play, No-Good Friday, written in 1958, dealt with the lives and suffering of black people in the townships.

In 1960 Fugard began keeping notebooks, which were later edited and published (1983). In her introduction to the notebooks, Benson (1983) quotes Fugard as saying that the content of the notebooks was "incidents, ideas, sentences overheard. . . .They reflect a certain reality in terms of the South African experience. . . . my plays come from life and from encounters with actual people."

After No-Good Friday, his other plays, except the ones to be discussed in this paper, are Nongogo (1959), The Blood Knot (1961), People Are Living There (1963), Hello and Goodbye (1965), Boesman and Lena (1968), Sizwe Bansi is Dead (1972), The Island (1972), Statements after and arrest under the Immorality Act (1974), Dimetos (1976), A Lesson from Aloes (1978), The Road to Mecca (1984), A Place with the Pigs (1987), and Playland (1993). Fugard has also written a novel and several screen plays.

How are the universally occurring needs for relationships made tangible by Fugard and how does the South African system of apartheid affect these needs for friendship and intimacy? Fugard (1987) says he feels free to call anyone on this earth a brother or a sister. His belief in a family of mankind is reflected in the relationships among the characters in his plays. "In each of Fugard's plays, intimate relationships among family, friends, or lovers inevitably lead to the exposure of a character's innermost needs, pain, and weakness" (Vandenbroucke, 1985, p. 75). According to Vandenbroucke (1985), relationships in Fugard's plays are usually interdependent. Basic relationships between siblings, mates, friends, and parents and children are explored. In the two plays discussed here, as well as in Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act, however, relationships are interracial.

Thus, one play narrating the relationships between blacks and whites under the South African system is "MASTER HAROLD". . . and the boys. The first performance of this play was given at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1982. The cast included Zeljko Ivanek as Hally, Zakes Mokae as Sam, and Danny Glover as Willie. This was Fugard's first play to be premiered outside of South Africa. Two reasons are mentioned for this. One is that the play was banned for performance in South Africa as being too inflammatory. Another reason mentioned is that the play's setting is so personal that Fugard feared it might disturb his brother and sister if it were first produced in South Africa (Jacobus, 1993).

The play, containing some autobiographical elements, explores the relationship between Hally, a white seventeen year old student whose Mother owns the tea shop that employs Sam and Willie, black men in their mid-forties. Over the years, Sam has served as a kind of spiritual father to Hally, in an emotionally intimate relationship. As the play nears its climax, Hally demands that Sam call him "Master Harold," instead of "Hally", highlighting the fact that most relationships in South Africa between blacks and whites are those between master and servant or madam and maid. Although Hally is lonely much of the time, his mother warns him not to let the servants get too familiar. According to Vandenbroucke (1985), Hally's demand to be called Master Harold "is a proclamation of racial superiority, but it is also the proclamation of an adolescent who yearns to become and adult." It is up to the spiritual father--the older generation--to point the way, and, as we shall see, this is exactly what Sam does.

We have mentioned the autobiographical elements in this play. What do they tell us about relationships between individuals of different races living in a racist society? As we said Fugard's mother ran a tea room similar to the one in the play. In his Notebooks (1983), Fugard elaborates on the autobiographical elements. He notes that his father was an alcoholic cripple, and that his feelings toward his father were ambivalent. In the play Hally says he loves his father, yet is also deeply ashamed of him. Another autobiographical detail is

that Fugard's childhood nickname was "Hally", just like the name of the youth in the play.

More important, the relationship between Sam, the black waiter, and Hally, was inspired by a relationship described by Fugard (1983). Sam Semela, a Basuto, worked for the Fugard family for fifteen years. Fugard recalls the kite made by Sam, "haunting" the servant quarters, sharing his books with Sam, and the shameful incident of spitting in Sam's face. Yet, despite the racial gulf and the difference of some twenty years in their ages, Fugard calls Sam "the most significant--the only--friend of my boyhood years" (1983, p. 25).

In this play, the black servants, Sam and Willie, are Hally's second family. Sam has been a friend and a surrogate father to the youth. We realize that Hally is more emotionally attached to Sam than he is to his own parents. This emotional attachment takes root and grows in spite of the conditions of apartheid.

As they reminisce, we realize Sam has done many things a father should do with his son, such as teaching him to grow up to be a man, sharing games of checkers, reading, and making a kite for the boy. Sam had made the kite for Hally to boost the boy's self-esteem after an incident involving Hally's father, which caused great shame for the boy. Indeed, it is Hally's low self-esteem and self-hatred which cause him to lash out at Sam near the end of the play.

When Hally begins to mock his own father, Sam tries to stop him. Hally tries to defend himself and his father, attacking Sam. The attacks accentuate Hally's sense of racial superiority, which has only been hinted at before. Hally reminds Sam that he is only a servant and that his father is a white man. He then demands that Sam call him Master Harold, like Willie. The situation gets very ugly.

However, as Sam says, "I've got no right to tell you what being a man means if I don's behave like one myself" (p. 59). He reminds Hally that although they have both been hurt, they need each other, and the Hally does not have to be alone. Sam says, "You don't <u>have</u> to sit up there (on the whites only bench) by yourself. You know what that bench means now, and you can leave it any time you choose" (p. 60).

Sam is showing the way for the relationship to continue, even though Hally has made him feel dirtier than he's ever been in his life. Fugard offers the possibility of interracial understanding. And if Hally grows up to be Fugard himself, then there is indeed hope.

The second play to be discussed is <u>My Children! My Africa!</u>. This play was originally produced by The Market Theatre in Johannesburg in June, 1989. It was first presented in New York in December, 1989, under the direction of the

playwright. The cast included Mr. M, played by John Kani; Isabel Dyson, played by Lisa Fugard, and Thami Mbikwana, played by Courtney B. Vance. The plot involves development of friendships between Isabel, a white student from a suburban all female school and Mr. M., a black teacher in a black township high school and Thami, Mr. M's protege. Fugard again presents us with universal themes in a specifically South African setting.

Before discussing the play, a brief mention in the way of background should be made in three areas where South African policies and events affect and, in a sense, define the characters. The first is education. According to Tatum (1987), in 1953 the Bantu Education Act was passed to centralize and control native education, training and teaching people in accordance with their opportunities in life. After the 1976 Soweto uprising, which was initially focused on the deficiencies of the education system, the Bantu Education Act was replaced in 1979 by the Education and Training Act, No. 90. However, continues Tatum (1987), major school boycotts from 1980 on until 1986 indicate that change in education remains an issue of vital importance.

Naomi Tutu, daughter of Desmond Tutu, in a recent panel discussion (1992) said that apartheid still exists in a modern, sophisticated guise. noting the situation in education, she reported that the South African government continues to spend three times as much for white education as it does for black education. The pupil-teacher ratio for white schools is one to 25, in black schools it ranges from one to 45 to up to one to 80 in rural areas. A recent article in the New York Times (Berger, 1992) noted small steps in the area of school integration. Still, less than one nonwhite student in 1,000 attends an integrated school.

Although the play was written in 1989, the play is set in 1984. Mr. M, a 57 year old black school teacher is still hoping that violence can be avoided and he is trying to bring about change by working within the system. A bachelor, Mr. M. has dedicated his life to his students. Thami, a brilliant student, now realizes that his future is limited by the system. He calls the classrooms "traps which have been carefully set to catch our minds, our souls" (p. 50). This evaluation echoes the words of a 1980 U.S. Congressional Study Tour report: "The South African government has used education as a political instrument to keep black South Africans in a semipermanent state of ignorance and economic deprivation" (as reported in Tatum, 1987, 20).

Another topic brought up in the play is the restricted social interaction permitted between whites and nonwhites. The Group Areas Act of 1950 proclaimed strict residential segregation. The Population Registration Act of 1950 stipulates that every person be assigned a racial category and that people of different races must live, learn, work, and travel separately (Tatum, 1987). Due to housing shortages in areas where nonwhites could find employment, families were often separated. Thami mentions that his father is a railroad

worker and his mother is a domestic worker. The parents live in Cape Town, while he lives with his grandmother and married sister in the "peaceful platteland because it is so much safer than the big city . . . " (p. 11).

Isabel's interactions with blacks have been limited to the black delivery "boy" of her father and the family's maid, Auntie. In the high school of the black township she is, for the first time, on an equal footing with blacks, and not the superior baas's daughter (p. 23). Thus, as we have noted in our discussion of "MASTER HAROLD" . . . and the boys, the social interactions between whites and blacks are generally limited to master/servant or madam/maid relationships. A recent article describing "Madam and Eve," a new comic strip in the Weekly Mail in Johannesburg, notes that for most white South Africans, their first exposure to blacks is to their black nanny or maid (Keller, 1993).

A third subject from the South African context that Fugard refers to in his play is what the South African government calls "black-on-black" violence (Tatum, 1987). Tatum specifically mentions the killings of "collaborators" by the "comrades". According to Wren (1991), homes of collaborators were burned and gasoline-soaked tires hung around the necks os suspected government collaborators were lit. The mob killing of a collaborator in the play has a profound effect on Isabel and Thami. Mr. M., who admits to Thami that he has reported the names of strangers from the north to the police, is insistent on holding classes. Thami warns him, and later tells Isabel he did try to stop the mob, but to no avail. Mr. M., ringing his school bell, is killed by the mob. Later, Thami, in attempt to make Isabel understand what it means to be black, calls the killing an "act of self-defense" (p. 73). Mr. M., called a "government stooge, sellout, collaborator" (p. 60), had betrayed his own kind and their fight for freedom. Thami points out to Isabel that her laws define it as treason when it is done to them and threatens their white world.

Now that we have looked at three areas of South African life My Children! My Africa! deals with, let us look at how relationships between persons of different races do manage to develop and thrive under such conditions. The characters are brought together when the Debating Team from Camdeboo Girls High is invited, by Mr. M., to a debate at Zolile High School in Brakwater, the "location" north of the lovely town where Isabel lives. She contrasts the terrible conditions in the Monument houses and buildings. The principal of Camdeboo Girls High had said the debate was a chance for a "pioneering intellectual exchange" between the two schools (p. 16).

The play opens near the end of the debate, which is won by Isabel Dyson, the captain of the girls' team. When Thami and Isabel are left in the room to collect their things, the conversation begins at what Knapp (1984) would call the small talk or experimenting stage. The conversation, cut short by the bell, continues at future meetings, as the relationship moves on to the intensifying stage (Knapp, 1984).

The development of the relationship between Isabel and Thami is paralleled by the development of the relationship between Isabel and Mr. M. and also by the changes in the relationship between Mr. M. and Thami. Isabel asks Mr. M to call her "Isabel instead of "Miss Dyson" and says she would like to be part of his extended school family. She admits to Mr. M. that she feels she's already made friends with Thami and that the visit to Zolile High was one of the best things that has happened to her. When Mr. M. proposes that the two high schools enter a combined team in an interschool English literature quiz, Isabel is delighted, for it will give her a chance to get to know Mr. M. and Thami better. ". . . I would like to get to know you all better. But how do I do that? I can't just . . . knock on your doors like you were neighbors or just living down the street. It's not as easy as that with us is it. You're in the location I'm in the town . . . and all the rest of it" (p. 22).

Isabel, Thami, and Mr. M. all get to know each other better as they come together to practice for the contest. While Isabel and Mr. M. are waiting for Thami, Mr. M. says, "You've become good friends, haven't you?" (p. 30). Isabel responds, "The best. The past few weeks have been quite an education . . . . I bet you in some ways I already know more about Thami than you" (pp. 30-31). When Mr. M. presses her for details about whether Thami has disclosed anything about being in trouble, due to the "reckless mood" in the location. Isabel is shocked. "Wow! That's a hard one you're asking for Mr. M. Just suppose he had, do you think it would be right for me to tell you? We call that splitting, you know, and you're not popular if you're caught doing it" (p. 32). When Mr. M. replies that he was asking out of concern for Thami, Isabel says Thami hasn't said anything, adding " . . . thank God! So I don't have to deal with that one. . . . If I ever did that to him, and he found out, that would be the end of our friendship you know" (p.32). Thami arrives, and the practice questions on the Romantic poets begin. Both Isabel and Thami enjoy the mental stimulation and challenge.

The interaction and friendship between Isabel and Thami has been interpreted in more than one way. For example, two different reviews of the play give different reactions. According to Matthews (1991), as Isabel and Thami throw bits of poetry at each other, they are drawn closer together. "Finally, they are within embracing distance, and the sexual tension is palpable even though they are still trading poetry. There is a moment when the audience is aching for them to embrace, but they do not, and because they do not, the senseless racism that forbids them contact is made all the more unjust" (Matthews, 1991). In another review of the same Yale Repertory Theatre production, McNally (1991) declares, "Isabel and Thami become the best of friends. They aren't lovers. There are no 'Jungle Fevers' vibes here. They are like brother and sister in Mr. M.'s extended family of pupils." It is clear, though, that the relationship is intellectually and emotionally intimate.

When Mr. M. says he must be leaving, Isabel invites him and Thami for tea, and Mr. M. accepts for them both. After Mr. M. leaves, Isabel, noting a change of mood in Thami, says she thinks Thami will like her folks and hopes he will come. "It's not a polite invitation. They really want to meet you." Thami responds, "Me? Why? Are they starting to get nervous?" (p. 42). Isabel replies that since she talks about him and the team so much, they want to meet him. Then the subject of Thami's relationship to Mr. M. comes up. Most of their disagreement has to do with differing views on how to better the condition of blacks. He says Mr. M. has old-fashioned ideas. Isabel wants to know, "Are we an old-fashioned idea?" (p. 43). Thami responds, "Not our friendship. That is our decision, our choice" (p. 43). He is not so sure about the competition.

The conversation turns again to Mr. M. Thami tells Isabel that Mr. M. has chosen to identify himself with the political system he and others are fighting against. Isabel then points out that Mr. M., she and Thami all need each other. Thami, who at this point does not realize how much Mr. M. does mean to him, tells her to keep her advice to herself. As she leaves, she says, "You used the word friendship a few minutes ago. It's a beautiful word and I'll do anything to make it true for us. But don't let us cheat Thami. If we can't be open and honest with each other and say what is in our hearts, we've got no right to use it" (p.45).

At the beginning of Act II, Thami tells Isabel he must drop out of the contest. There will be a boycott of classes starting tomorrow. Isabel accepts the fact that their team will not enter the contest, but wonders if it means the end of everything. "I mean, we can go on meeting, just as friends?" (p. 55). When Thami asks when, Isabel responds, " . . . anytime. Next week! (Pause) I'm not talking about the competition Thami. I accept that it's dead. I think it's a pity . . . but so what. I'm talking now about you and me just as friends. . . . So our friendship is an old-fashioned idea after all. . . . Why can't we go on seeing each other and meeting as friends? Tell me what is wrong with our friendship?" (pp. 55-56) Thami replies that others won't see things the way they do. In the eyes of the location, visiting Isabel and having tea is a crime. Thus, further external pressures come to bear on the relationship.

After the mob has killed Mr. M., Isabel and Thami meet one more time. Isabel has responded to a note from Thami for an urgent meeting. Isabel, of course, has heard of the death of Mr. M. Thami wants to say good-bye. Isabel learns Thami's version of the death of Mr. M. They both admit that they loved Mr. M. Thami will leave the country. The play ends as Isabel is at a mountain pass that was very dear to Mr. M. She promises to do what she can to make her life useful so that Mr. M. would be proud of her. "After all, I am one of your children you know. You did welcome me to your family. (A pause) The future is still ours, Mr. M." (p. 78).

In MASTER HAROLD . . . and the boys and My Children! My Africa!, we have seen how Fugard presents relationships. The relationships between Hally and Sam and Hally and his parents, and those between Mr. M. and his "family" show the conflicts between the generations that can develop, and also how the older generation can inspire and show the way. The emotionally and intellectually intimate relationships between Hally and Sam and between Isabel and Thami have much in common with quality friendships described in communication texts (e.g. Adler, Rosenfeld, Towne, 1989). Many reasons for forming relationships, such as similarity, complementarity, reciprocity, competency, and disclosure are evident. Many of the expectations one has from friendships, such as caring, honesty, confidentiality, loyalty, and understanding are certainly present.

We have seen how the theatre of Athol Fugard presents the universal themes of friendship, family, and the need for intimacy in a South African context. We have seen the effects racism has on interracial relationships. In his plays, nonetheless, Fugard gives us examples of interracial relationships, in which the individuals find common ground. Although of different races, his characters are individuals who develop quality friendships and interracial understanding.

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